

8140 Short Rd

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February 23rd, 2013

Dear Elected Official,

I am writing to you to address a dangerous, devastating, American history-changing issue occurring at rapid speed in our society. I am referring specifically to the degradation of our public education system and the future of our country. As I am midway through my eighth year of teaching high school science, I often feel my own educational experience occurred in a different time period. The rigor and level of expectation I experienced from 1996-2000 seems obsolete compared with the learning environment that currently exists today. I could describe the disgusting language used by this generation that is now viewed as normal, the addiction to various social media that has inhibited communication skills, and the extreme lack of parental support when it comes to holding our students accountable for their actions, but I would like to address the current attitude of "making all students college ready."

I want to be clear that I am not seeking pity, but instead one minute of your attention to focus on an immediate problem that will affect our society in multiple ways. More and more there are powerful people pushing for a national curriculum with national standards which in part, sounds like a reasonable plan. It is important to have standards to strive for and wanting all parts of our nation to teach certain core topics is understandable. This concept falls apart when you look at the individuals who are being taught: young people who have incredibly diverse backgrounds, goals, motivation, and home lives that all impact learning far more than any powerful person is willing to admit. Gone is tracking and teaching students based on their needs. We are now living in a mainstream educational system. Every kid, with every intelligence issue, every personal/social/ emotional struggle imaginable is thrown into one room and expected to learn the same content, at the same time, and pass the same "common test." Ridiculous doesn't describe this philosophy. Idiotic does.

Every good teacher knows you need to reach all students and more than anything we want to, but the reaching is not the problem. The most alarming trend is the mindset of this new generation. There is no joy in learning. There is no interest in seeking knowledge to understand our world. But what is scaring me the most is hard to describe. One of the best moments in a teacher's career is when they metaphorically see a light click on in a student's mind. You can see the wheels turning and a true connection has been made. Over the last few years I have seen a dramatic drop in these reactions and more kids turned off to school. Instead of sharing our "what if..." questions, I am repeatedly asked on a weekly basis "WILL THIS BE ON THE TEST???"

Please take a moment and think about what I am trying to convey. We have a generation of kids who only want to know answers. I am told "Just tell me how to do it so I know what to do for the test." There is no wonder, no wanting to know why something happens or how something was discovered. While these powerful people think stricter standards will create a new workforce with greater skills, I am living this nightmare where imagination is disappearing and students are being programmed to pass standardized tests.

I am at a crossroads in my life, struggling daily to decide if and why I should stay in this field. Our state continues to tie student test scores to my value as a teacher. I am told if I am highly effective at my job, I will reach all my students no matter what the circumstances and they will achieve an 80% or better on their final exam. Well, I don't know a single person who can get every student in every class to ignore their personal struggles, educational weaknesses, and cell phones long enough to learn 100% of the time. There seems to be a continuum of unrealistic expectations placed on the teachers and students, and it is going to tear our schools apart. We have to start talking about the truth: WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT. We all learn different, have different interests, and want different things. Trying to make every one the

same is going to have a disastrous outcome. Our state and national leadership is forcing kids who are not all built with the same skill set nor have the same family support structures to complete the same courses to be "college ready." The love of learning is disappearing because everyone in the educational system is being restricted in creativity and flexibility. We are being placed in the same molds; feeling trapped and tuning out from what everyone wants, increased learning. Next year my school district is exploring the idea of every core teacher giving the same chapter tests. Why should I stay in a profession that does not let me adapt instruction to my student's needs?

I truly understand the need for rigor, accountability in our schools, and the expanding global economy that we are competing in. We should not pretend all students have the same abilities and motivation to do well. Any person who does is delusional. I will leave you with this thought. When explaining my frustration to my father who has farmed corn and soy beans for over 35 years, I used this analogy:

Imagine the governor calls all the farmers to Lansing to discuss a new law being passed. The law reads that from this day on, all farmers will use the same seed variety and the same fertilizer. The state does not care what soil type exists on your farm, what your growing conditions are, or what weather you experience during the growing season, you will use the state mandated seed and fertilizer. Not only do we expect all of you to follow this law, but we expect you to grow at least 55 bushels/acre for soy beans and 180 bushels/acre for corn. Anything less will cause you to lose your land.

My father agreed that everyone would be outraged and it's completely unrealistic. Each farmer is an expert and knows what it takes to produce a good crop and they also know it's still up to chance depending on Mother Nature. A good teacher knows what it takes to create meaningful learning, and we know it is still up to chance because everyday we are interacting with living, breathing people who think and make choices. At the end of the day, we can follow any recipe the state or nation gives us, but it is still up to the learner to want to be a participant. Go easy on the teachers. Please let's start talking about holding students and parents accountable for the learning that is occurring. If you would like my thoughts on changing this crisis, please contact me.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Jessica Keeping